

## Phenomenological Study of Transition Through Freshman Program

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### Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the academic lived experience of freshman students in Haramaya University transitioning through freshman program and describing through their language and voices. The transcendental phenomenological design was employed and Schlossberg's transition theory was used as a theoretical lens. Data were collected using in-depth interviews from eight purposely selected freshman completing regular students of the University. The finding of the study revealed that though the University environment is conducive and triggered achievement motivation in students, the students transitioned through the freshman program with serious challenges and doubts about the fit between their readiness and the academic demands of the program. Emotional stress of COVID 19, instability due to civil war in the country and shortness of academic schedule were identified as the major factors affecting the freshman students' academic performance. It is concluded that under the current scenario in the University and the country at large the results obtained by students in the freshman program would not be a valid measure of students' potential and to serve as a criteria for selection of field of study and placement of students into different faculties and study programs.

**Keywords:** Transition; Lived Experience; Academic Schedule; Freshman Program

### Introduction

Transition through the current higher education freshman program can be a set of complex experiences for students. As a higher education instructor of a freshman general psychology and life skill course, the first researcher has witnessed the complex phenomena of freshman students' academic experience and took the initiative to conduct the study in this pertinent area. Students starting freshman programs may perceive their academic preparedness with feelings of confusion and insecurity [1]. Others enter feeling overwhelmed and susceptible to the pressures of newfound responsibilities [2] and academic demands [2]. Similar studies in Ethiopia, at Jimma and Dilla Universities, for instance, showed adjustment problems among freshmen students facing adjustment problems are unable to make meaningful academic standing [3] and end up with premature termination of college education [1,2,4].

Studies on freshman students have mostly restricted their analysis of adjustment problems in universities. Research has not been done on how students pass through such higher education freshman program challenges. Thus it is imperative to conduct research for understanding the complexities and nuances associated with the academic lived experiences of students transitioning through freshman program.

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Transition theory provides a framework for understanding change and adapting to transition [5]. A transition is any event or nonevent that causes a change within an individual's environment, routine, relationships, or outlook [6]. The three major factors that work in concert to influence adaptation to transition include the perception and characteristics of the transition, the characteristics of the environment surrounding the transition, and the characteristics of the individual.

Currently, transition theory began to be considered by professionals in higher education as a viable theory in understanding college students [7]. [8] applied transition theory to international learners: "moving into the learning environment, moving through it, and preparing to leave, or moving on (p. 15). A positive transition and integration for first-year freshman students may consist of several aspects including adaptation to college life, social and academic integration, and peer involvement [9-12]. According to [6], interpersonal support systems and social support networks are essential for a successful transition.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the academic lived experience of freshman students transitioning through their freshman program, and describing it through their language and voice.

### Research Questions

The central question under investigation was "What are the lived experiences of students during the transition through their freshman program at Haramaya University?" Additional sub-questions posed were:

1. What were students' expectations for being a university student before the start of freshman year experience?
2. How do students describe their short-term lived experiences as they move through their freshman year?
3. What outcomes were realized by participants while completing their freshman year?

### Methodology

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach. Using Schlossberg's transition theory as the theoretical lens, the transcendental phenomenological design would provide an insight into the lived experiences of freshman students. This methodological approach was selected assuming that it would provide a deeper understanding of the academic experiences of first-year/freshman university students who have transitioned into post-freshman academic programs in one of the public higher education institutions in Ethiopia. Data were collected using in-depth interviews from 8 purposively selected freshman program completing regular students at Haramaya University. All eight students met the selection criteria for the study, successful completion of their freshman study program in the University, remain enrolled as a student during the research data collection term in January 2022 and willingness to participate in the study.

The interviews were coded and categorized using MAXQAD software. Next, analysis was made inspired by Moustakas (1994) cited in [13] and Husserl's approach to phenomenological investigations. A phenomenological reduction was made to inductively develop themes and sub-themes from the data. In order to persuade the study participants to involve in the study they were approached with utmost care and treated with respect after they provide consent to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted using the interview questions developed in advance along with additional set of impromptu questions. These questions permitted a deeper understanding that was brought up by the participants. Overall, the researchers were quite conscientious about establishing trustworthiness with the study participants and had no prejudgments nor made any attempts to lead the student.

### Results

#### Students' expectations during freshman year

Freshman students enter into a new living and learning environment which may impact institutional commitment and establish a connection to the institution. The campus environment, as well as the environment of the surrounding area and institutional characteristics

impact their adaptive resiliencies. The data from the interviews indicates an optimistic academic environment. When asked 'What was their expectation for being a university student, they replied:

- *"I perceived the new college environment is better than I expected, students and teachers were good to me. I easily communicated with my classmates and teachers as well. This developed my sense of hope. I expected the freshman program to be simple and play a great role in my social life" P1.*
- *"Being in Haramaya University, one of the pioneering Ethiopian Higher Education Institution, I was very happy to be its part" P3. At first, I was not very happy. However after I visited the campus I found the university environment is good, attractive, and adaptable. What motivated me was that it was my long desire to join a university from my early childhood and that my long term vision is realized" P5.*
- *"As an academic environment, HU has many beneficial impacts. Free handout, internet, water.... I am happy to be a student in HU" (P6). "I was very happy when I arrived ... green and very attractive environment, facilities are motivating factors.... The university environment is smart, attractive, and comfortable to live in and learn from, I expected the program is new with student diversity. So I decided to be sociable" P4.*

### Feeling motivated or unmotivated

Motivation is a psychological feature that moves humans to action toward a desired goal. Motivation is the reason for the action which gives purpose and direction to behavior. Motivation is goal-directed behavior. A majority of this study participants arrived at the campus highly motivated to score a good result. The data from the interviews indicate that this was true for the majority of the participants:

- *"I am very motivated to score good grades which helped me to join my favorite field". P1 "I am motivated to complete my first degree and to be independent in my life. I consider freshman course achievement as part of my desired goal P2. "I am so interested in the social life in the university and expect to pass the freshman program with a good result". P3 "I was motivated to score good results. But the opposite is true" P5.*

However, without a concrete goal, motivation and goal-directed behavior ceases. Yet freshman students have serious doubts that they fit to the academic demands. Thus diminishing their motivation. This was true for two participants:

- *"I expected the freshman program, in general, is too challenging of all, given a short period" P6. "I was motivated that University may help me to achieve my long term goal. What motivated me was that the commitment of instructors develops hope" P8.*

### Faced challenges

During freshman, it is inevitable that students face challenges in their academics. The more there is a workload in the university, the more it becomes challenging for the students to grasp what is being taught and lose the stamina to offset their challenges. It worsens pressure to maintain their retention towards the next academic level. The data from the interviews indicate that this was true for almost all the study participants.

As they have mentioned:

- *"It was difficult, in reality, my freshman year experience was filled with a number of challenges such as COVID 19 pandemic, instability and shortness of time. Anyhow, I am happy for taking this program to strengthen my reasoning ability" P1. "At the beginning it was very difficult because the curriculum is new, and it was difficult for me to get information from senior students" P4.*
- *"I couldn't adapt easily because everything looks new. Hence, my freshman experience was like I had been swimming in the ocean of tension/stress" P5 "The teaching and learning condition was very difficult and my previous happiness was replaced by excessive anxiety" P7 "I passed many ups and downs in my freshman program. I was mistreated by some teachers and lost my focus toward my desired goal" P8.*

Based on data obtained from the respondents, one of the most challenging factors for students while being a freshman student was the shortage of academic time. The study participants described their biggest challenge in freshman life as follows:

- *"Not enough time to complete the course because of time limitation" P2 "Three-weeks teaching and one-week mid-term exam and the same schedule for teaching half of the remaining course content followed by final examination. I completed the two semesters of the program in only sixteen weeks" P3 "Shortness of academic schedule was my biggest challenge. For the whole semester, only two months were given to complete. There was no continuous assessment at all it was very difficult to succeed" P4.*

In addition to that, the emotional stress of COVID 19 and instability due to civil war also affected students' academic progress:

- *"Moreover the existing COVID 19 pandemic and political instability in some parts of the country worsened my anxiety" P4 "I was challenged being in a class with many corrupted /cheating students" P1.*

Though not all students felt the same experience, they were able to give their thoughts on how to handle and prevent their anxieties. Each of the participants shared moments from their first year of college where they found success and felt proud of their accomplishments. As they have mentioned:

- *"I had no fear to survive I have no doubt. I believe 100% to succeed because I was being informed that university education is so challenging. So I prepared myself in advance to easily overcome the challenge" P3 "I feel I have successfully overcome the freshman challenges even though there were many challenges, I didn't lose my dream, so I defeated the problems and am so happy still" P1 "Later I realized to be patient and change the situation by hardworking even when there is shortness of time. Some administrators were mistreating me during the examination. All in all, I can say that I was not successful enough, I am sorry. It was my peers support that helped me to survive" P7 "I didn't successfully overcome the freshman challenges beyond the mere minimum survival point" P4 "I didn't successfully overcome the challenges because of confusion. I lost my attention" P2.*

They also discussed the supports that helped them achieve their successes and helped them overcome some of the challenges they faced. Four participants mentioned the different networks that they found supportive in their college path. The support systems that the participants discussed were their friends:

- *"I didn't get any support in my freshman year" P4 "Yes I overcome the freshman challenge with the help of my senior batch of students" P6 "It was not easy to communicate with many instructors. But, some were very thoughtful and brotherly and treated me very well" P1*

Participants also described the importance of self-reliance in managing some of the challenges they faced:

- *"I had no fear to survive I have no doubt I believe 100% to do because I have been informed that university is too challenging. So I was prepared in advance to easily overcome the challenges". P3 "I decided to be patient and change the situation through hard-working" P7.*

### Outcomes of freshman program

At present, the university entrance exam result, freshman GPA and COC exam results are the three achievement measures used as a selection and placement criteria for students having completed freshman program and ready to join specific fields. Students with higher scores have had the advantage of being placed in departments of their choice while those who were excelled by others were placed in departments against their selection priority. Participants described their field selection process in their words as follows:

- *"As I finished my freshman, I wanted to study EdPM. However, I was assigned to Psychology which is not my first choice because I couldn't score a good result and I think that was why I was assigned to a department against my priority" p1. "I was forced to choose the college and department. Anyhow I will secure my graduation" P4 "I was confused in selecting my field of study, there was no fair selection and placement" P8 "The freshman curriculum has no rule and regulation, so I didn't get the field of my choice" P7.*

- *"I have a sense of security being assigned to my second prioritized field of study. Anyhow the process of field selection was not good. I am not 100% happy. In my view, freshman program achievement is not up to the standard to measure students' potential" P3.*
- *"I exactly got the field of study I wanted. Freshman courses helped me to be a reasonable and logical thinker. I learned to read more content in short time but not enough time as a whole" P2.*

### Impact of freshman program

*"I am really sure that my freshman course helped me to understand my instructors early. I scored as much as I can in the second semester so my freshman course played a positive role in my life. By now, I am not bad with my current field of study. Despite its challenge, I learned a lot from my freshman experience - patience and hard work. My overall experience is positive because I learned very important things to be prioritized in my life. I learned equality and justice in addition to knowledge gained from the instructors' course. Yes it was my first semester that lowered my result that is why I was challenged in field selection" P1* *"The positive thing I saw in my freshman year was that it filtered students based on their inner potential. Lack of time to master the content was its negative side effect" P4* *"In my opinion, freshman program is very essential in bridging the background knowledge gap and preparing me to become an informed person in my field of choice" P7.*

### Discussion

Transition theory provides a framework for understanding change and adapting to transition (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). Currently, transition theory began to be considered by professionals in higher education as a viable theory in understanding college students [7]. [8] applied transition theory to international learners: "moving into the learning environment, moving through it, and preparing to leave, or moving on (p. 15). A positive transition and integration for first-year freshman students can consist of several aspects including adaptation to college life, social and academic integration, and peer involvement [4].

### Optimistic academic environment

Majority of the study participants described the university environment as smart, attractive, and comfortable to live in and learn from. The physical environment of the university attracted students and impacted their adaptive resiliencies. Once enrolled, if the environment is a good fit for the student the likelihood of retention and persistence increases [14]. For first-year students adjusting to the new environment and establishing a support system will positively impact their sense of belonging. A welcoming environment, comfortable living space along with sufficient facilities influence adjustment to college and developing a sense of place [13]. However, few of study participants joined the university without preconceived challenges.

### Achievement motivation

Motivation is a psychological feature that moves humans to action toward a desired goal. Motivation is the reason for the action which gives purpose and direction to behavior. Motivation is goal-directed behavior [3]. Affordable academic environment has a positive influence on adjustment to college and for developing a sense of *motivation* which enhances students' purposeful academic activities [1]. The study found that majority of the study participants arrived the campus highly motivated and aspiring to score good results. On the other hand the campus academic environment may easily frustrate students coming to the institution without having a concrete goal which may result in motivation and goal-directed behavior to cease. These students had serious doubts about the fit of their academic demands which in turn led to diminishing motivation as described by some of the study participants.

### Pressure to maintain retention

During freshman, it is inevitable that students face challenges in their academics. In this regard, one of the most challenging factors for students while being a freshman student was the shortage of academic time. A fit between the student and the academic environment of the institution provides students with interesting and challenging instruction and course work applicable to life and future career [13]. In addition, the emotional stress of COVID 19 and instability due to civil war also affected students' academic progress. To withstand the

challenges, some students felt the supports from their friends and senior batch of students as helpful; they were also able to give their views on how they handled the challenge and maintain retention by themselves.

They also discussed with their friends that self-reliance as the only important support system that helped them overcome some challenges they faced and to achieve success and maintain retention. A successful transition requires interpersonal support systems and social support networks [6]. The four identified components that assist individuals with adapting to a transition include situation, self, supports, and strategies [15]. Essential to the first-year experience, students need support from institutional resources, including faculty and staff, as well as programs and services, to assist with transition and integration to college [14].

### Outcome realized

Even though the majority of this study participants arrived at the campus highly motivated to score good results, the data from the interviews indicated majority of the study participants couldn't realize their desired goal of scoring good results that may help them secure in selection of their preferred field of study. Students with higher scores have had the advantage of being placed in departments of their interest and those who were expelled by others were placed in departments against their selection priority. According to the participants, freshman program achievement was not up to standard to measure student's potential, especially under the condition they transitioned through. The study participants also described their field selection process as unfair. Finally, the study participants appreciated the contribution of the freshman program in cultivating their potential so long as they are able to pass through the challenging situation [16-24].

### Conclusion

The finding of this research shows though the university environment is smart, attractive, and comfortable for triggering achievement motivation in students; students joining the institution without a concrete goal pass the year with serious doubts about the fit between their aspirations and the academic demands in the university.

The emotional stress of COVID 19, instability due to civil war, and shortness of academic schedule affected students' academic progress. Based on the lived experiences of the study participants it could be concluded that the freshman program result could not be a valid measure of students' potential to be used as criteria for selection and placement into different fields of study.

### Implications for Academic Affairs

A collaborative campus-wide effort, dissemination of outcomes of good or best practices might be required as a pathway for achieving a higher education freshman student transition rate. It is recommended that the administrators in the Student Affairs Directorate and the Academic Affairs Office as well as the Directorate of the Freshman Program further examine the freshman achievement measures to gain a deeper understanding for proper placement of students into different fields of study.

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